

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus
NO WINE BEFORE HIS TIME

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the years, I have officiated at fifty-eight weddings. In pre-marital counseling, I always gather “nuts-and-bolts” information, such as the names of the wedding party members and the times and places of the rehearsal dinner and reception. I also ask the bride and groom how many guests they are expecting. Almost every time, the bride and/or groom hesitates and says one of two things: “Well, we’re still working on the invitation list and trying to make it shorter” or “How many people does the church hold?” Answers to “How many guests are you expecting?” vary from “Just a handful, mostly family members” to as many as 250.

250 is about the largest number any bride and groom have ever given me, although I have been to some wedding receptions where there were more people than attended the wedding ceremony. However, I have never officiated at nor attended a wedding with 5,400 guests, or even 2,700! Can you imagine?

Where did those numbers come from? A number of years ago, when I was working on another sermon on this story about Jesus changing the water into wine, I picked up the phone and called my big brother, David, in New Orleans. David has been in the wholesale and retail wine business for forty-two years. I said, “David, I’m working on my sermon and I’ve got a strange question for you. How many people can you serve with 180 gallons of wine?” (The amount comes from John’s note that there were six stone water jars each holding twenty or thirty gallons.) When I told him which gospel story I was preaching on, he said, “I think I know where you’re going with this! Get out your calculator!” He said, “180 gallons = 900 bottles of wine. At six glasses of wine per bottle, that’s enough for 5,400 people to raise a toast to the bride and groom!”

Running out of wine was a wedding host’s worst nightmare. To compound the problem, we’re not talking about a three or four hour wedding reception at the Mad Boar. The wedding festivities lasted as long as a week. The whole community celebrated. When Mary tells Jesus, “They have no wine,” it’s more than just an inconvenience. Peasants who normally would have little money would save what little they had for a long time to buy the wine for their child’s wedding. To run out of wine would be to be a failure as a host who wanted to extend the expected hospitality to his guests. But, seriously, enough wine for 5,400 people?

I doubt there were 5,400 people in the little town of Cana in Galilee in 30 A.D., much less 5,400 wedding guests raising their glasses in congratulations to the happy couple. In other words, this is a superabundant, ridiculous amount of wine — sort of like a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (John 4:14) or twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish after 5,000 men had been fed all they could eat (Mark 6:43) or the hundredfold yield of grain (Matthew 13:8) or a woman having a party for all of her friends and neighbors when she finds one lost coin (Luke 15:9) or the debt of 150,000 years of wages for which the king forgave his slave (Matthew 18:24). It's just a ridiculous amount! A superabundant amount! An amount that none of us would ever expect or provide or be worthy of or, perhaps, even hope for! But that's the thing about God's grace and love: They are unexpected and more than we deserve or can (or should) even hope for.

In the late 1970's, Orson Welles was the spokesman for Paul Masson wines. One commercial shows the famous actor sitting at a desk in a dark paneled room. As the ad begins, Orson Welles is turning down the volume on the stereo, and says, "It took Beethoven four years to write that symphony. Some things can't be rushed — good music and good wine. Paul Masson's Emerald Dry — a delicious white wine. Paul Masson's wines taste so good because they're made with such care. What Paul Masson himself said nearly a century ago is still true today . . ." And then Orson Welles says, very dramatically, "We will sell no wine before its time."

Does Jesus' response to his mother's comment about the hosts running out of wine strike anybody as odd, at best, maybe even a little disrespectful? What does Jesus mean when he says, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" Well, he could be saying, "It's none of our business if the wine runs out." Then again, he could be saying, "Get off my back. Don't bother me." Of course, Mary seems to ignore Jesus' comment when she instructs the servants to do whatever he says. Jesus, in turn, seems to relent when he, in fact, does do something about the wine shortage.

But that's not all Jesus says to his mother at the wedding reception. He also says, "My hour has not yet come." Already, here at the beginning of the gospel story and his own ministry, Jesus is aware of God's timing and his own purpose for coming into the world. Listen to these other instances in John's gospel when Jesus' "hour" is mentioned:

* Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come (John 7:30);

* He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come (John 8:20);

* Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:23-24);

* Jesus said, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (John 12:27-28)

* Now before the Festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1);

* In the garden, when Jesus had prayed for his disciples, for the church, and for the world, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him” (John 17:1-2)

In John’s gospel, Jesus’ hour of glory is when he is lifted up — not on a cloud as he ascends into heaven, but on a cross at a place called Golgotha, “The Place of the Skull.” When Jesus’ hour finally did arrive, it was his time to die. So, we might say that the shadow of the cross falls over the entire gospel of John, even across the week-long wedding party in the little town of Cana, just north of Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth.

In light of this timetable — in light of Jesus’ hour of glory — perhaps we can hear the story of the wedding at Cana in a new way. “Woman,” Jesus said to Mary, “what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” As believers and disciples of Jesus Christ, we know that his hour did come, that he was lifted up on the cross for our sins, and that he was glorified by God the Father.

Today we hear a story about Jesus’ glory being revealed to his disciples when he changed some water into wine at a wedding feast. Throughout John’s gospel we hear that Jesus’ greatest hour of glory comes, surprisingly, at the cross. Also throughout John’s gospel we hear of the new thing that God is doing in and through Jesus Christ — including making enough wine to entertain 5,400 wedding guests!

In her study of this story about the wedding at Cana, our friend, Frances Taylor Gench, says this about Jesus changing the water into wine: “We are to understand that the miraculous act Jesus is about to perform will be an extravagant one. That, more than anything else, is what makes this story a suitable introduction to Jesus’ ministry in John. Jesus is the giver of extravagant gifts. He came that we might ‘have life,’ and ‘have it abundantly.’ ‘From his fullness’ we all receive, ‘grace upon grace’ — through him we are filled to the brim!”¹

There’s an old joke about a state trooper pulling a car over on I-40 at night because the driver was weaving all over the road. When the cars came to a stop on the shoulder of the road, the trooper noticed a CLERGY sticker on the car’s trunk. When the trooper shined his light in the driver’s window, he asked, “Reverend, have you been drinking?” “Oh, no, not at all,” said the minister. Just then the trooper noticed a wine bottle rolling around on the floor of the passenger side. “What’s in that bottle?” asked the trooper. “Oh, officer, it’s just water,” said the minister. “Let me smell it then,” said the trooper. When he smelled the bottle, he said to the preacher, “Reverend, this is wine.” The preacher threw up his hands and shouted, “Praise the Lord! He did it again!”

That’s funny, but it doesn’t do this gospel story justice. Perhaps a better description of what really happened at the wedding reception in Cana was penned by the 18th century British poet, Alexander Pope, who said, “The conscious water saw its Master

and blushed.” In the presence of the one who turns water into wine, who changes want into an overabundance, who brings joy and something new into our lives, we, too, should blush.

Here are the words to a song called by “Wedding at Cana” by Tony Bardon. Listen especially to the last verse, about our time and Jesus’ time:

For weeks they hardly spoke about anything else
As the invitations came through the door.
Who would be there?
What would they wear?
What excitement would there be in store?
There would be food aplenty,
Washed down with vintage wine.
There were going to a wedding in Cana.
They were going to have a very good time.

After the marriage ceremony,
The wedding banquet began.
There was eating and drinking
And laughing and winking
And all the best singers sang.
As they were celebrating
And everything appeared to be fine,
Someone was calculating
They were just about to run out of wine.

Down at the wedding at Cana,
The water turned into wine.
He was a guest, just like the rest,
But they didn’t know he was divine.
And even when he told her
His time had not yet come,
When she persisted, he couldn’t resist,
A mother’s loving plea to her son.

Now they had wine in abundance,
So they brought some to the main man.
He was surprised,
Hey, raised his eyes,
It was better than when they began.
And he interrupted the bridegroom,
Who was talking to a friend.

He said, "Pardon me,
I couldn't help but see,
That you kept the best wine 'til the end."

Jesus sent a message from Cana,
Out across the frontiers of time,
That he could bring life in abundance,
Just like he brought them wine.
And even if we tell him
Our time has not yet come,
When we resist, he will persist,
Just like his mother had done.²

Let us pray: Great God, your mercy is an unexpected miracle. Help us to believe and obey, that we may be filled with the wine of new life, promised in the power of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frances Taylor Gench, *Women and the Word: Studies in the Gospel of John*, Horizons Presbyterian Women 2000-2001 Study.

²Tony Bardon, "The Wedding at Cana," from *The Greatest of These Is Love* (www.jamendo.com).